

## Barbara Pizziconi

# Introduction

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This special issue on Japanese offers a collection of quite diverse studies, whose *trait-d'union* is their examination of the function of honorific forms in situated social practices, both in a pragmatic and a metapragmatic sense. All the studies revisit previous established characterisations of Japanese politeness, and all could be seen as attempts to qualify more critically in what sense and to what extent talking about honorifics is talking about politeness, and how polite meanings are produced, transmitted, or contested. Before I comment on the individual papers, I shall provide a brief reminder of focal issues in the research on Japanese politeness.

Works on Japanese have occupied a prominent place in politeness literature, ever since a few studies by Yoshiko Matsumoto (1988, 1989) and Sachiko Ide and her associates (Ide 1989; Hill *et al.* 1986) emerged as powerful critiques of the Brown and Levinsonian model that dominated early politeness research. Their work, together with others on non-Western languages (e.g. Adegbija 1989; Gu 1990; Nwoye 1992; Mao 1994; de Kadt 1998) arguably accelerated a swing away from 'universalism' and toward 'relativism', a cyclical alternation between which is, for some, a feature of Western intellectual history (Urban [1939], quoted in Janney & Arndt 1993: 21). Critiques from Japanese very much hinged on honorific usage, though of course linguistic strategies of the kind described in Brown and Levinson's model, which can be interpreted in terms of individual 'territory' or other-appreciation, are not difficult to find in Japanese as well (cf. Pizziconi 2003: 1478 for a summary). Together with the relative 'handiness' of Brown and Levinson's categorisation, this is arguably an important reason for the enduring popularity of their model, especially in cross-linguistic studies focusing on speech acts (e.g. Fukushima 2000; see Kasper 2009 for a review). Nevertheless, works on Japanese highlighted several significant limitations of that model. For example, it was argued that some features of honorific usage (e.g. the choice between different speech-stylistic markers for the same proposition highlighted by Matsumoto 1988) cannot be fully accounted for in terms of

FTA-dependent, local, inferential calculations, and their interpretation requires the analysis of broader – and culture-specific – normative parameters, including, among other things, speakers' presupposed assessments of their position within relevant social networks, and the social nature and cultural value of the activity or setting in question. Such observations questioned the ontological underpinnings of that model: particularly criticised was the assumption of the speaker's *individualistic* concerns for *face*, posited as universal and allegedly incompatible with the *sociocentric* notion of face that seemed to characterise behaviour in Japanese (cf. on this debate Haugh & Bargiela-Chiappini 2010).

These observations led Ide to envisage qualitatively different regulatory principles of polite linguistic behaviour and to adopt the term *wakimae*, or 'discernment', to refer to a principle contrasted with that of speaker 'volition', and originally defined as 'the choice of linguistic form or expression in which the distinction between the ranks or the roles of the speaker, the referent and the addressee are systematically encoded' (Ide 1989: 230), and which is beyond an individual's choice (see Eelen 2001: 55; Watts 2003: 81; Pizziconi 2003: 1476, for evaluations); in her latest monograph, Ide (2006) reiterates that while Japanese speakers, too, have a certain degree of latitude in choosing linguistic forms in certain settings (i.e. they can exercise volition to a certain extent), they do so within broad and 'untranscendable constraints' (*koete wa naranai kyōkaisen*) determined by the setting (*ba*) itself (2006: 109). One such fundamental constraint is the socio-cognitive distinction of the dimension of in- and out-groupness (*uchi/soto*), putatively corresponding, on the linguistic plane, to plain/polite form distinctions. The model implied a very strong link between honorific forms and politeness, insofar as these forms pre-eminently (if not invariably) signal the existence of polite attitudes.

The subsequent fortune of the concept of 'discernment' in the literature on politeness is arguably due to several concomitant reasons. Firstly, it seemed to provide a serviceable construct for explaining some undeniable cultural differences that a model focusing on universal features inevitably neglected. Secondly, the field as a whole had grown frustrated with both the individualistic premises and the static conceptualisation of social variables (distance, power and degree of imposition) of Brown and Levinson's model (Werkhofer 1992: 154, 174; Watts 1989; Watts *et al.* 1992b) and a need was felt to home in on social context, problematising and enriching the concept further (cf., e.g., Watts 1989). The term 'discernment' conceivably galvanised attention to the social embeddedness of linguistic action and the often unspoken, unnoticed, unconscious, socially conventional aspects of linguistic behaviour, and this lent momentum to a re-conceptualisation of politeness as 'appropriateness' vis-à-vis specific contexts. Set on this course, some researchers turned the notion on its head,

and effectively suggested that ‘discernment’, in the sense of a speaker’s ‘framing’ his/her contribution in relation to both social and activity-based variables, is in itself a pre-requisite for appropriateness in any language (cf. Werkhofer 1992; Eelen 2001; Watts 2003: 83, 93–95; Pizziconi 2003, 2011).

Two studies in this issue offer data that can illustrate further what ‘discerning’ may entail, and what kind of meanings are ‘discerned’ through the use of honorific forms in situated contexts. Both Geyer’s and Cook’s papers provide counterevidence to the original, fairly deterministic, formulation of *wakimae*, in which the role attributed to exogenous norms appeared to reduce speakers to puppets controlled by the strings of social conventions, and illustrate both the context-reflecting and context-creating potential of honorific systems (the proper, i.e. dynamic, concerns of pragmatics: Thomas 1995: 183).

Naomi Geyer starts from an outline of the discursive turn in politeness studies and its constructivist inspiration, which very much characterised the last decade (for reviews Kasper 2006; Haugh 2007; and Geyer’s paper for extensive references), and claims that these can be reconciled with Ide’s original insights. Indeed, it would be foolish to maintain that there are no regularities in the usage of honorific forms, no collectively recognised conventions that account for deference entitlements or preferred informality, or to assume that speakers negotiate such norms on a *tabula rasa* in every new encounter. Yet of course there is a sense in which a discursive, constructivist understanding of politeness is incompatible with a simplistic understanding of social norms as “rules” ... decided upon by others rather than by ourselves, and that we are socially constrained to abide by’ (Watts 2003: 117). While Geyer fundamentally accepts Ide’s conceptual take, she proposes a ‘weak’ version of the concept of *wakimae*, reframing it as participants’ ability to orient to a shared point of reference, e.g. typical (assumed default) verbal behaviour in particular settings, or typical verbal behaviour of individuals in particular roles, adherence to and departure from which allows inferential meanings to emerge (cf. also Dunn 2005 for a review). Social norms are therefore no longer seen as a deterministic input to behavioural choices, but they nevertheless constrain how these choices are assessed in discursive contexts. She shows how the ‘baseline’ adopted by participants is not invariably linked to the setting (e.g. faculty meeting, dinner table), but rather ‘flags up’ (or indexes) at the outset the participants’ relative positioning toward that setting, and from there acts as a reference point from which a number of other stances (public/personal, formal/informal) can be displayed, by means of context-contingent style-shifts. For example, a speaker who adopts an informal ‘baseline’ in an otherwise formal context will still resort to the formal style in crucial moves where his ‘official’ persona is foregrounded. Interestingly, in spite of this well documented discourse-based dynamic, her

study appears to show that some specific factors, notably deference entitlements, are likely to override discursive moves. Thus even within a ‘teasing sequence’, overall marked by a shift-down, when speech is specifically directed to a superior, the honorific form is resumed. This would suggest that Ide is indeed correct when envisaging an overarching ‘untranscendable constraint’, although again that this characterises only some languages remains to be demonstrated.

Cook’s contribution extends a strand of studies urging researchers to abandon native speakers’ intuitive and decontextualised judgments in favour of analyses of honorific usage in specific discursive contexts. The relevance of discourse in this paper is not so much due to the role of specific structures (turns, sequences, or operators), but to its feeding ‘meaning’ to the very honorific forms under analysis; the meaning thus obtained by these forms is a more volatile kind of meaning, which cannot be objectified or be attributed to the honorific form itself. Previous studies from this indexical perspective have demonstrated that honorifics are not direct markers of pre-existing and absolute social status or rank, nor stable markers of dyadic relationships either, but dynamically (through discourse-internal shifts) orient interaction participants to – and construe – a huge range of more fleeting meanings, from setting-specific ‘temporary’ statuses, front/back-stage personae, affective nuances such as emotional vs. ritualised stance, etc. (extensive references are provided in her paper, and a broad review in Cook 1998 and 2006; see also Yoshida & Sakurai 2005). In this issue, Cook analyses the context of a relatively ‘niche’ genre, i.e. TV shopping channels, and discusses referent honorifics as the main (though not the only) tool in forging, through the ongoing discourse, the very identity of a programme’s participant – not a unitary entity, but a negotiable (multiple, contestable and changeable over time) kind of subjectivity (Weedon 1987: 32). The participant in question is in fact a guest in a double capacity: while he does participate in the sales pitch, he also appears as the eminent inventor of the advertised product; his authoritativeness as a scientist is instrumental to the achievement of the commercial objective. While this authority is of course explicitly claimed by reference to the guests’ academic background, Cook shows how it is also more implicitly but no less significantly fashioned through a discursive dance, during which the guest manoeuvres his footing (Goffman 1981) by means of shifts in referent honorifics usage, and appeals to the viewer/customers from this double position. Hence honorifics *can* be seen as construing status and rank (e.g. through the indexing of a deferential stance), but they also enable the speaker to perform different types of activities (i.e. personalised vs. technical descriptions) which in turn steer his relation to the viewers and enable him to perform different identities: what is notable is that such mean-

ings could not be determined in any way if extracted from the specific context in which they take place, because they are simply not ‘coded’ in the honorific forms.

The indexical view of honorifics (cf. Agha 2007 for a general theoretical discussion and Pizziconi 2011 on Japanese) is optimally compatible (Silverstein 1998: 130) with the longstanding work by linguistic anthropologists such as Silverstein, Woolard, or Kulick, who have convincingly argued that the relationship between forms of talk and social structures is never direct, but rather ‘political’, i.e. mediated by language ideologies (see for reviews Woolard & Schieffelin 1994; Woolard 1998).

Okamoto’s work offers a critique of Japanese studies on the ideological battlefield of ‘feminine language’ or *joseigo*. She maintains that the very normativity invoked in accounts of linguistic behaviour – including those which purport to shun a prescriptive attitude – has too often been taken for granted and needs to be deconstructed. Deconstruction involves capturing the entangled relation of metapragmatic discourse about language use with clusters of other phenomena (Woolard 1998: 3), including discourses about class, power, morality, and other such broader constructs. Thus she outlines the pervasive workings of ideologies (in particular patriarchy and elitism) in moulding the very relationships between different orders of phenomena, i.e. the ‘relationship between femininity and general modes of speaking and that between general modes of speaking and specific linguistic forms’ (p. 205). While discussing the broad historical and social contexts which engender specific dominant ideologies, she questions the assumption of their homogeneity, and highlights the existence of competing ideological stances even in historical times, no less susceptible to struggles over who gets to ‘write the rules’ than in postmodern societies. Some (e.g. Inoue 2004) see such ‘oversight’ – i.e. that dominant norms have always been contested – less as an accidental loss of historical memory than a deliberate (if covert) political project. The argument here is that it is precisely because an idealised model of women’s language presents itself as homogenous and historically immutable (no matter how inconsistent and ironically contradictory its content may be at close observation, as Okamoto reminds us) that it can be recursively deployed as a powerful measure to mark the ‘deviant’ (cf. Inoue 2004 on how the fetishisation of women’s language served the nationalistic agenda of modern Japan). Synchronically, too, when tackling the question of how hegemonic normativity is resisted, simplistic answers are hard to find: the interplay of competing ideologies is very complex, if – as argued by Woolard (1985) – dominant ideologies can be rejected *in toto* or only partially, i.e. selectively, depending on their connotations in specific social contexts. This provides further evidence of ideologically mediated heterogeneity in linguistic behaviour

notwithstanding the considerable metapragmatic regimentation of the notion of femininity, and the fallacy of any essentialist definition of femininity, or feminine language.

Metapragmatic politeness, or discourse about politeness by interaction participants (Eelen 2001: 35), is illustrated in this special issue not only with the thick brushstrokes of a cultural history of femininity and politeness, as in Okamoto's study, but also with the finer brush lines of setting-specific analyses of explicit, conduct-regulative practices and how these are received.

Dunn's study examines it in the discourse of business communication, Burdelski's in caretaker-child communication in the family and at preschool. Far away as these domains may seem at first sight, they both represent sites of enculturation involving relative 'newcomers', if not complete novices, and openly display the concern of the 'experts' with the transmission of 'valuable' cultural meanings (i.e. meanings relevant to the micro-culture in question, whether that of the workplace, or of the kindergarten). Both papers centre on the specific meanings that are thus transmitted, the linguistic forms that index such meanings, and the induction processes observed, but I wish to add some side-remarks on the 'learning/acquisitional' issues involved in these processes of enculturation.

Dunn focuses on the world of companies specialised in training for business communication, where politeness serves rather specific goals, i.e. 'customer satisfaction' and the pursuit of a 'positive corporate image' (p. 227). The first kind of activities recorded by Dunn are strongly reminiscent of the structuralist/behaviourist second language classroom (see, for example, Johnson 2001: 171–174): 'learners' – here company trainees – are first presented with a model of the linguistic forms they are to 'master' in that lesson (i.e. honorific forms), then carry out 'substitution drills', and then proceed to so-called 'application exercises' with either the teacher or in pairs with other learners, including 'role plays'. How can structuralist/behaviourist techniques (originally devised to promote behavioural *habituation* in a second language) be suitable to the native classroom, whose members are presumably already familiar with deeply entrenched cognitive *habits* (such as *uchi/soto* discernment) linked to the usage of these linguistic forms? The easy answer is that honorific usage is indeed a 'foreign language' or a 'foreign code': it is often noted that few of the contexts encountered by young Japanese until they graduate actually require the active use of formal language (for Nomoto 1957, a consequence of the increased informality in academic settings). A more complex answer could be that, for example, the confusion between addressee and referent honorifics is a sign of the times, part of an overall historical linguistic change whereby addressee honorification is increasingly being prioritised over referent honorification, and the

ideological change toward democratisation (Inoue 1999). The second type of activity illustrated by Dunn is more reminiscent of functionalist language teaching. The teaching of verbal strategies for projecting a ‘kind’ and ‘considerate’ attitude takes as a starting point the function (speech act) that the speaker intends to carry out, and prescriptions are provided on how it is to be formulated or correctly ‘packaged’: i.e. with a profusion of apologies and indirect expressions, which seems to fill the gap in the trainees’ knowledge of the desired register of business transactions, and which requires more than honorific manipulation.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Dunn also suggests that in these training sessions, speaking with ‘consideration’ of the addressee/customer is emphasised, if not also valued more highly, than speaking politely (similar observations are documented in Wetzel & Inoue 1999: 75). While again it is possible to assume that this specific hierarchy of values is a function of the specific domain (i.e. the goals of efficient and effective business interaction), her study also provides evidence of strong cross-modal iconism (Agha 2007: 22), i.e. evaluative terms that refer to a range of different phenomena, whose generalisability to other domains would constitute another interesting empirical question. For example, the term *kirei* (‘beautiful/neat’) appears to qualify, in the instructor’s discourse, a range of disparate signs: from bowing to voice quality, to the appropriate usage of honorific forms. Further ethnographic accounts focusing on the scope and features of the metasemiotic fields thus construed, and on how such iconic signs develop, would be of huge importance to capture native intuitions about cultural meanings (and culture-internal variations thereof).

While again discussing ideologies and metapragmatic practices, Burdelski’s study also reveals some rather interesting problems in the L1 acquisition of honorifics, which I would like to highlight, as being probable linguaculturally-specific issues. A first problem has to do with the strong ‘relativist’ character of Japanese honorification (Shibatani 1990: 380). When talking to out-groups, the use of deferential terms for in-groups’ superiors (such as parents, bosses, etc.) is commonly banned in Standard Japanese (unlike in Korean, for example,

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, in spite of endless praise of vagueness, indirectness and the unspoken, often found in the cultural nationalistic (*nihonjinron*) literature on politeness (cf. Pizziconi 2009 for a review), that this considerate attitude should also be conveyed through the use of clearly audible, cheerful (*akarui*) and easy to understand language strikes one as a rather singular prescription, peculiar perhaps to the objectives of a business context.

Brown 2011: 33, 58<sup>2</sup>). The marking of participant- or setting-dependent relationships requires several sub-skills: the ability to recognise the salient social categories of in-group/out-group (*uchi/soto*), the ability to map that distinction, in absolute terms, onto appropriate indexical markers (be it through nouns, adjectives, predicates or other semiotic registers), the ability to (re)frame self's relationship to a referent relative to various types of addressees, and an ability to mark that shifting frame linguistically (Bachnik 1994). No doubt the children in Burdelski's study – all of 2.5 to 3.4 years of age – are well aware of *uchi/soto* boundaries at least with regard to the contexts more familiar or relevant to them, but it is unclear whether by this age they are capable of mapping some of these distinctions linguistically both in relative but also in absolute terms, as Takahiro's (2.5 years) amusing performance offers no evidence of this (p. 252).<sup>3</sup> The dynamics of use of such deictic forms require a great deal of inferentiality to unpack implicit socio-cognitive categories, and mere repetition of forms available in the input is not a productive learning process – as the hilarious effects of Takahiro's performance illustrate. Takahiro's case also further demonstrates how very extensive scaffolding is required to extract the illocutionary meaning of 'request' from the locutionary meaning of 'question', indirectly confirming prior findings by Clancy (1985) on Japanese children's production.<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Ervin-Tripp's (1971) study of San Francisco Bay Area English-speaking children aged 2 to 11 proposed that sensitivity to social indexing developmentally precedes sensitivity to act-related parameters of instrumental or persuasive tactics (in which actions and their cost, rather than status or relationships, are the primary concern) and that this is 'motivated by young

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**2** The contrast with Japanese could not be more dramatic, if, as studies reported in Brown (2011: 33) show, Korean speakers are more likely to use the subject honorific *-si-* to refer to their parents when talking to people outside the family (even if friends) than within the family group.

**3** While Takahiro has no trouble understanding the denotational reference of the honorific form, it is not clear whether he understands the underlying deferential schema, and he definitely misconstrues the interactional schema; cf. Pizziconi (2011: 53) for an illustration of this terminology in relation to referent honorifics. Makie (1983: 13, 24) suggests that such awareness may not even be developed in an 8-year-old and provides further evidence that even when the child appears to distinguish sets of referent terms for family members to be used to outsiders, they still may use the 'wrong' set. This exemplifies acquisitional difficulties with the conceptualisation of the specific deictics' interactional properties, even when its denotational properties are already part of the child's active competence.

**4** Clancy's 1985 study of directives in L1 acquisition shows that although less frequent than direct requests, indirect requests are commonly available in the input of 2-year-olds; these children however use indirect requests in what she estimates to be no more than 22 percent of all cases.

children's desire to appear competent' (1971: 328).<sup>5</sup> These findings call for more longitudinal research in the acquisition of honorific and speech act acquisition in Japanese. Social indexicality may well be a primary concern in children's linguistic development, but the skills required to produce language appropriate to adults' morality (and established social norms of conduct) necessitate fairly extended training, in which metapragmatic explication of the relevant norm may well play a very indispensable role.

This introduction chose to spotlight the pragmatic/metapragmatic continuum in the studies presented (we can talk of a continuum if we understand the first as the domain of experience from which language users derive reflexive abstractions). However, several other themes could have guided this discussion, which are also common concerns to all the contributors: language ideologies (which 'envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality and to epistemology', Woolard 1992: 3) and evaluations, norms of behaviour and normative stances (and their challenge, exploitation or socialisation), or, also, concepts of politeness. All the studies have taken (honorific) usage as their starting point and identified an array of interactional meanings generated (i.e. constructed, Duranti 1992) through them (the indexing of identities or personae, affective and ideological stances, situational roles, etc.), which profiles a far broader area than politeness, but sooner or later in the discussion, these have been linked, directly (overtly so in the studies of metapragmatic uses) or indirectly, to meanings prototypically associated with *Politeness*: deference or respect, status or rank. That politeness invariably emerged in these analyses of honorific usage appears to be the prototypical ideological construct governing our understanding of honorifics, a very powerful schema that is consistently hinted at, when not blatantly invoked by users.

Honorifics appear to do much more than paint the same denotational meaning with different hues; they organise our very interpretation of reality, and the essays in this issue provide a showcase of their commanding structuring power.

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5 'We propose two explanations for the bell-shaped curves we have found, with politeness dropping in the oldest group. One is that young children believed that politeness was persuasive, but in the family context then learned it was not. Another is that politeness from the start is a social index, not a persuasive device. The youngest children identify on-record polite forms as appropriate to control act contexts for certain hearers. In some cases, we have found that the first use of modal auxiliaries was in requests, suggesting they are learned as formulaic social indices. By four and five, children reveal their knowledge of the social distribution of different control act types in role enactments. These show us that the children regard forms like 'please', and permission requests as appropriate to and symbolic of particular social relationships – that is, they have become social indices' (Ervin-Tripp 1971: 328).

## Bionote

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